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ABSTRACT

Wordsworth II, a cooperative venture of English teachers and computer scientists at Michigan Technological University, is designed to be a viable alternative to the computer assisted instruction (CAI) currently on the market for college writing courses. Consisting of eight process-based modules, the program offers a sophisticated and interactive program that addresses all parts of the composing process from the initial planning of a topic through the final polishing. Each of the modules focuses on one of the writing assignments: description, narration, personal writing, classification, evaluation, persuasion, and creative writing. All the modules follow a similar format and are divided into two programs--planning and polishing. The planning program of each module involves the students in strategies they can employ before beginning to write--brainstorming, focusing, organizing plot lines, and constructing audience profiles. Divided into early, middle, and late draft branches, the polishing program involves students in various strategies of revising, recasting, or proofreading. To be a truly valuable asset, each of the modules further provides individualization, interactive responses, ease of use, and accurate recordkeeping. (HOD)

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Wordsworth II: New Wave CAI for College Composition Teachers

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Each year, like most college English teachers in this country, I am charged with a task heroic if not quixotic in its proportions. I am expected to guide over two hundred students--mathematics, business, chemistry, and engineering majors of all abilities and skill levels--through that wickedly complex maze we call the writing process. I must teach these students how to brainstorm, plan and focus their topics before they begin to compose; how to write multiple and increasingly successful drafts of their papers; and how to assure that their text conforms to conventions of grammar and style as they approach a final written product. And if there is one thing I've learned from my six years of teaching composition, it is that there are too many students and too few English teachers to do this job well.

In the Humanities Department of Michigan Technological University, we have turned to computers for help in teaching our composition classes. For our freshman English classes, we have designed Wordsworth II, a program of computer-assisted instruction that supplements process-based (rather than product-based) teaching in composition. Wordsworth II can lighten the work load of teachers by involving their students in an individualized writing program outside of the regular composition classroom.

History

Most English composition teachers would agree that in computers and computer-assisted instruction, they have found their greatest allies in the war against increasing work loads. Teachers have discovered, for example, that the relatively easy tasks of teaching grammar and usage are easily adapted to binary logic and that microcomputers can, for these mechanical tasks, accomodate more students, with more patience, than can the best of teachers. Thus, programs such as Plato, Houghton Mifflin's Dolphin Language

Series, and The University of Notre Dame's English Tutorials are able to act effectively as electronic workbooks, teaching students how to use commas, avoid dangling modifiers, and how to recognize the subject of a sentence. These programs free teachers for more difficult tasks in the composition classroom--lecturing, having individual conferences, or organizing small group work.

Unfortunately computer-assisted instruction in the field of composition has gone little beyond this electronic workbook stage. The CAI currently available for composition teachers has two very significant shortcomings. First, CAI in composition has, in most cases, simply duplicated the programmed, audio-visual materials developed for slides, tapes, and filmstrips ten years ago and is only now beginning to take advantage of the branching or interactive capabilities of new hard- and software. Second, most CAI currently available to composition teachers focuses only on editing and proofreading, two relatively minor activities within the larger process of composing. No commercial CAI addresses the entire spectrum of activities involved in the composing process--from the first planning efforts, through the writing of multiple drafts, to the final revision and editing activities. A few pioneers, such as Hugh Burns of the Air Force Academy (Burns, 1980) and Robert Bishop of the University of Michigan (Bishop, 1973) have been able to apply the computer to more complex matters of process and content in composition classrooms; nevertheless, these remain relatively isolated attempts.

The most obvious reason for the simplistic CAI now available to composition teachers involves the fundamental schism existing between humanities and technical fields. The CAI currently on the market for the composition classroom has been written either by English teachers who have

only a limited grasp of the potentials inherent in software design or by technicians from computer software companies who have only a limited vision of modern composition theory and pedagogy. The result of this schism is software that is limited in its usefulness because it has not kept pace with the recent sophisticated developments in hardware manufacturing.

The Challenge

Wordsworth II, a cooperative venture of English teachers and computer scientists at Michigan Technological University, is designed to be a viable alternative to the CAI currently on the market for college writing courses. It offers English teachers a sophisticated and interactive program of computer-assisted instruction that addresses all parts of the composing process from the initial planning of a topic through the final polishing.

Wordsworth II consists of eight, process-based modules that supplement classroom instruction in composition. Each of the modules is focused on one of eight writing assignments most commonly given in college composition classes: description, narration, personal writing, classification, evaluation, persuasion, and creative writing.

At this time, the Wordsworth II team has completed and field tested the prototype, narrative module for Wordsworth II. The remaining modules are being written and will be completed and field tested by 1984. All the modules will follow a similar format; each will be divided into two programs: PLANNING and POLISHING (see Figure 1).

The PLANNING program of each module, after reviewing for students the major lecture points associated with the assignment, will involve them in strategies they can employ before beginning to write a paper, i.e., brainstorming to generate or invent possible topic ideas, exploring and

FIGURE 1

Narrative
Module

POLISHING

--Reviewing lecture points
--Inventing potential topics
--Focusing on topic
--Organizing plot line
--Considering audience

PLANNING

Early Draft

--Identifying aim & purpose
--Identifying audience
--Identifying focus
--Considering organization
--Eliminating deadweight
--Defining major strengths
--Defining major weaknesses

Middle Draft

--Working with organization
--Showing vs. telling
--Focusing on a central theme
--Creating effective introduction
--Writing dialogue

Late Draft

--Considering transitions
--Employing vivid verbs
--Punctuating dialogue
--Checking spelling

focusing potential topics through short journal entries or freewrites, organizing plot lines, and constructing audience profiles. The POLISHING program of the Wordsworth II modules--divided into EARLY draft, MIDDLE draft and LATER draft branches--involve students in various strategies of revising, recasting, or proofreading depending on the kind of draft they bring with them to the computer (see Figure 1).

Programming Considerations

Wordsworth II was created as a supplemental teaching tool for English composition teachers at MTU. We programmed the series in UCSD Pascal on our Terak 8510A with the help of computer science experts on campus. From the outset, we were primarily concerned with avoiding the traditional shortcomings of CAI in the field of composition and determined to make Wordsworth II a truly valuable asset for writing teachers at the college and university level. As a result we resolved that each of the Wordsworth II modules would meet the following criteria:

Individualized Instruction. One of Wordsworth's most important functions is as a supplementary instructional tool. Thus, each of the eight modules begins with a review of major lecture points for the assignment under consideration. The narrative prototype, for example, reviews lecture points on conflict, character, plot, detail, setting, and motivation. Every one of these lecture points is explained at several branching levels, each level involving its own examples and practice exercises. Thus, students can select the amount of explanation and practice most appropriate for their own understanding of the subject. A student confident about the narrative lesson, for instance, can choose only a brief reminder of

each lecture point while a confused student may select several, increasingly complete explanations of a particular point. In the sample conversation below, the student asks for two levels of explanation:

Point #1: Be aware of how your paragraphs are organized.

Most of us, Horatio, realize that a paragraph is a unit of organization. All paragraphs should have one sentence or a central idea on which they revolve. In narratives, paragraphs often lack a topic sentence, but there is always one major idea that all the details in the paragraph support.

Do you need a little practice in recognizing the main idea of a paragraph? If you do, type Yes, if not type Go On.

Horatio types "YES."

Read the passage below, Horatio. Choose that sentence you think incorporates the main idea of the paragraph and type in its number. Then hit my return key, and I'll tell you what I think.

> (1) Last week my brother, Zeke, wrangled a job as a rolling advertisement. (2) By ten o'clock on Friday morning he was cruising down Green Street wearing pink shorts and carrying a placard that read, "Eat Oysters, Live Longer." (3) By noon he had attracted quite a crowd. (4) Zeke is a maniac, a roller-skating rabble rouser.

Number of the main idea?

Horatio responds
with 1, 2, or 3.

No, Horatio, that's not exactly right. The whole point or focus of the paragraph is that Zeke is a wild and crazy fellow--a rabble rouser on skates, as detailed in sentence 4. Would you like further practice on this concept? If so, type in "YES", if not type in "GO ON."

Horatio types in "YES."

Okay, Horatio, read the next paragraph and choose the sentence that incorporates the main idea. Write the number of that sentence when I give you the cue, *.

> (1) Zeke winged it past old Mr. Blondersnatch, the neighborhood grouch. (2) Unfortunately Zeke's antenna, which had been deformed by several previous accidents, caught Mr. Blondersnatch's cane. (3) When it flew out of

> the old man's hand, he fell flat on his face. (4) Zeke couldn't play it straight, even on the job. (5) The police took away Zeke's wheels to protect him from himself.

Number of the main idea?

Horatio responds with 4.

Hey, Horatio, excellent job! The whole paragraph is focused on the idea that Zeke gets into a fix every time he does something--even when he's on the job. This is stated in sentence 4. Now, let's get on with the program.

Interactive Responses. Perhaps Wordsworth II's most important goal is to involve students in all phases of the writing process--from planning an initial draft to polishing a final draft. Wordsworth II programs encourage students to respond in writing by interacting directly with them via the cathode ray tube (CRT). The programs, for instance, ask students to brainstorm ideas about potential topics and list them on the screen; to type in freewrites, or preliminary stream-of-consciousness explorations of a topic; to revise paragraphs on the CRT, and to type in profiles of characters, plot lines, and audiences. The following excerpt, for instance, shows how Wordsworth II helps students build profiles of the characters they will use in their narratives:

Well, Horatio, how many main characters (very important characters) do you plan to have in your narrative? List them by name.

Horatio types in
names of major characters.

Okay, how many secondary characters (characters of lesser importance) do you plan to have in your story? List them by name.

Horatio types in names of
secondary characters.

Are all these characters strictly necessary to the conflict? Can

you cut any of them out? Remember, you don't have to tell the story exactly as it happens. Sometimes it helps your narrative to combine two characters into one! I'll list each of the characters you have identified. After I write their name, you write a sentence telling why it is necessary to have them in your story. Hit the carriage return when you're done with each character.

Horatio types in justification
of each character.

Finally, Horatio, what physical and mental characteristics of your characters will you have to emphasize? I'll list each of the characters you've identified. After I write their names, you write one or two sentences about how they look and act. Hit the carriage return when you're done describing each character.

Horatio describes each character.

The Wordsworth II program also reacts to the students' responses; calling them by name; reminding them of previous answers, and evaluating, in a limited fashion, their responses. Wordsworth II can, for instance, use length and number cues to determine if students have listed enough preliminary topics for consideration or scan a text for key words and phrases to decide if the students have succeeded in practice exercises. The following example illustrates one evaluative section of Wordsworth II's prototype module:

Well, Horatio, now that you have the basic elements of a narrative paper, you will want to choose an episode for your own paper. What kind of episodes best lend themselves to short narratives? Well, consider the following suggestions:

---Your first love affair
---A death of a friend or relative
---A situation that caused you to change your opinion about a friend, someone you didn't like, or a group of people
---A situation in which you were wronged by a person or an institution that was supposed to have your best interests at heart
---A situation that made you grow up

Got any ideas? Let's try listing them. You know, sometimes making a list can help you generate ideas for a paper. What I want you to do is write down in a list form all the episodes you can think of

that might be appropriate for a narrative paper. Number each item, each episode, on your list. Don't worry about spelling right now--we'll get to that much later in the writing process! Try to enter at least five episodes. When you finish typing in your events hit the carriage return so I'll know that you're done.

Student types in
list of ideas.

Well, Horatio. That's a good start, but you could probably use a few more ideas on your brainstorming list. Remember, the whole idea of listing is to generate lots of ideas that you can choose from them later on. Will you try to add a few more ideas? I'll show you your original list, and you can give it a try. Remember to number each additional item you add. Hit a carriage return when you've finished so that I'll know you're done.

Student types in three
additional ideas.

Okay, Horatio, I think we have enough ideas to work with now. As a matter of fact, you've got a pretty good start! Now, we have to pick the three episodes you think will make the best narratives.

Ease of Use. Because Wordsworth is offered on a voluntary, extra-class basis for our freshman English classes, it must encourage neophytes as well as more experienced computer users. We cannot allow students to be scared away from the instructional material Wordsworth II presents because they fear computers. Thus, we have written the Wordsworth II modules in a lively, engaging style. The modules also avoid computer or composition jargon and complicated file manipulations. The example below is typical of the light tone and clear directions we try to provide in the Wordsworth II modules:

You know, Horatio, the special challenge in writing a narration is to recreate the scene for your reader. You have to bring the situation to life by providing very vivid, explicit details that document what happened and how it happened. This use of vivid examples to recreate a scene is called showing. Obviously, it involves much more than just telling a story. Often details that

help to show what happens are sensory--details of sight, sound, smell, touch, and feel. Other times, they are details about someone's thoughts or feelings. The use of vivid verbs also helps to show what's happening.

Do you need practice in distinguishing showing from telling? Type YES if you do; type GO ON if you do not.

Horatio types "yes"

I'll try to illustrate the difference between showing and telling, Horatio. Read the two paragraphs below and choose the one that shows you what is going on--that recreates the situation for you. When I flash this on the screen, *, type in the number of the paragraph you've chosen, and I'll tell you what I think.

> (1) I didn't want to watch Dickie do it, but I couldn't stop myself. He clambered up the ragged, gray rock face, grabbing on to the small, fragrant juniper bushes to steady his progress. Once when he shifted his feet small showers of pebbles cascaded down the cliff and onto the piles of massive boulders below. When he reached a narrow ledge fifty feet above where I stood, he stopped, turned, crouched slightly, and launched himself into the air. By the time he hit the water, I was a nervous wreck.
>
> (2) I didn't want to watch Dickie do it, but I couldn't help myself. He climbed the rock face, got to a ledge and dove off into the water.

Which paragraph shows you what happened? Type in the number.

Accurate Recordkeeping. Wordsworth II provides students with records of their converstions with the computer. This has proven to be an exceptionally popular feature with the students who have field tested the prototype module on narration. They appreciate the opportunity to take home the journal writings, plot lines, audience and character profiles that they have created in response to the program's promptings and the chance to use them in writing drafts of papers. Wordsworth II also provides teachers with a list of student users and the modules they have accessed for classroom records.

Conclusion

We believe that Wordsworth II is successful as a supplementary program of computer-assisted instruction in composition because it is a truly collaborative effort. Each of the Wordsworth II modules begins with a script written by an English teacher familiar with modern rhetorical theory and pedagogy. These scripts identify the content for the various assignments, designate multiple levels of explanation and practice, and define criteria for evaluating student performance. Software design specialists then translate these scripts into programs that will operate on the Terak 8510A microcomputers to which our students have access. These specialists also observe students as they field test the modules so that inappropriate presentations, ambiguous directions, and ineffective exercises can be eliminated.

If the student reaction to our prototype module is any indication, our cooperative effort has provided an effective alternative to the simplistic fill-in-the-blank CAI programs. Our students find Wordsworth II to be "enjoyable" and "almost as much fun as a video game." Perhaps more importantly, however, they find it to be useful in their own writing efforts. As one student noted:

> A computer program for creating English papers is definitely helpful. The most difficult part of a paper is finding a good topic. Not many students know the procedure for discovering a topic. Furthermore, most students are too lazy to sit down and follow the procedure to the finish. With computers, however, all information necessary for writing a paper is right in front of your face on a screen. The computer explains the step by step procedure for writing a paper. The student can develop the paper as quickly as he can type the information into the computer. If you discover that the topic chosen is not specific enough or wrong, you can easily erase everything and begin from scratch.
>
> The computer is like a game. It encourages the student to write. The computer also breaks the monotony of scribbling down information on paper. Since it is a machine that doesn't run forever and many people are usually in line waiting to use it, the

> student is pushed to type something when asked a question by the computer, making free-writing faster and easier. For most students, it's very difficult just to sit in front of a computer without typing in something. But when someone sits down to write a paper, he can sit for hours without writing anything.

It is important to note that this comment is representative of the responses we received from the freshmen who used Wordsworth II. All of the students who field tested the prototype module agreed that it was a "valuable" teaching tool. Not one of them complained of having to work with a mechanical teacher of composition or of feeling frustrated when trying to undertake a task of creative writing at the prompting of a computer.

The next two years should see us increasing our use of Wordsworth II in our own department and in English departments at other universities that have volunteered to field test the material. We can only hope that more programs like Wordsworth II will become available to English composition teachers who continue to struggle with the burden of increasing work loads and writing courses. For it is in the field of composition, where we teach students the processes involved in writing, that computers can offer English instructors the most help. As Dr. Robert Taylor from Columbia University notes,

> All too often in any writing course that does not rely upon computers, the essay, book report, story, or other document turned in is the main thing, and pupils get little sense that <u>how</u> they manage to write it matters. Most students are hardly aware that composition is a <u>process</u> of refinement, not a one-step fabrication. Lack of time and dread of scribal labor usually prevent writing students from correcting even minor errors, let alone making major organizational changes to improve their writing. Rewriting is the exception rather than the rule. Computers can change all of that.

We believe that Wordsworth II is one small step in the right direction.

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